Testimony of:

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President

The Freedom Forum

May 21, 2003

Subcommittee on National Parks,

Recreation, and Public Lands

Legislative Field Hearing on H.R. 1442

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is an honor for me to be here today with other Vietnam Veterans, with Gold Star Mothers and friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, to speak in support of the proposed Visitors Center, which I think is an excellent idea which fills a pressing need.

Although I am speaking strictly for myself today, in my professional life I am the president of the Freedom Forum and the Newseum, the interactive museum of news that will open its new facility at Sixth and Pennsylvania in a few years, just across the street from the National Art Gallery. I am also a former editor-in-chief of USA TODAY, so I bring the dual perspectives of a journalist and a museum educator to the subject that is before us today.

Today, nearly three decades after the Vietnam War ended, it is becoming harder to recall the intense turmoil and the bitter divisions the war brought to Americans' lives. If you would indulge me for a moment, I would like to take you back to the spring of 1967, and share a moment from my life with you. I was twenty-two years old, and I was teaching English to high school seniors in Western Massachusetts. I had no desire to teach school; I was teaching because under the arcane rules of the Selective Service System of the time, I could escape the draft. My motivation was not exactly a service to my students.

I walked out to my mailbox in Amherst, Massachusetts on that fine spring day and found two letters. The first was from the Peace Corps, accepting me as a volunteer and offering me a position teaching English on a small island in the Pacific. Visions of grass skirts danced in my head.

The second letter was from Lewis B. Hershey. He wrote: Greetings, you are to report to an induction center in Hartford, Connecticut. You have been drafted. I don't believe General Hershey signed the letter personally.

Unsure of what to do, I called the Peace Corps and explained my dilemma. The woman in Washington was very nice, but firm. She said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Prichard, but the Defense Department takes precedence in these cases."

So, despite fears for my own safety and deep ambivalence about the cause, I reported for duty. I was one of the few Ivy League graduates to be drafted. I served thirteen and a half months in Vietnam, most of it in a small town called Sadec in the Mekong Delta. Although, thank God, I was not shot at very much, I gained a lifelong respect for the courage and competence of the American soldier, no matter how controversial the cause, or how dirty and dangerous the duty. And although over time I grew to oppose the war, and later publicly questioned the wisdom of our commitment, I learned the value of service to one's country, even in the most unpopular of wars.

Twelve years after I returned from Vietnam, I was a young editor at a start-up newspaper called USA TODAY. It was Veterans Day, 1982, and I read in The Washington Post that on that Saturday there would be a parade of Vietnam Veterans marching down Constitution Avenue to dedicate Washington's newest memorial, that long black wall that had been so controversial to build.

The Veterans who marched that day in support of the Memorial were a rag-tag, long-haired bunch. They reminded me of the American rebels of 1776, that “rabble in arms” that secured our independence from the greatest superpower of that day.

I grew up in a small Minnesota town near the Canadian border called Thief River Falls, and when the Minnesota contingent came marching by on Constitution Avenue, it was led by a high school friend of mine who had been wounded with the 25th Division. He was pushing his buddy in a wheelchair; they had both been blown up when their armored personnel carrier had been hit by rocket propelled grenades.

Forsaking my young family, I jumped off the curb and joined the parade, marching along together with the other veterans, swept up in the joy and gratitude of all of the veterans. We finally felt that our service to our country was beginning to be recognized. We had fought and served and suffered in the most unpopular war in American history. More than fifty-eight thousand of us had died. And finally, we felt some measure of thanks and appreciation and acknowledgement for our service, thanks to Jan Scruggs and all of the other determined people who got this Wall built.

And today it is the most popular Memorial in Washington, with more than four million visitors a year.

But, as Chairman Pombo has observed, more than half of the visitors to this Memorial were born after the Vietnam War ended. Many – perhaps most – have little or no knowledge of why the war was fought, how we became involved, whether we won or lost or just fought to a draw, and what we learned from one of the most wrenching American experiences of the Twentieth Century. And no museum in Washington deals with this subject in any depth.

What could be more appropriate to redress this gap in our knowledge and understanding than this Visitors Center? What better way could there be to teach our young people, and young people around the world, about some of our most precious ideals:

n The value of service to one’s country, even for an unpopular cause;

n The courage to speak out in a democracy, for or against any issue;

n The bravery of those who fought, even when they knew the American public was ambivalent or antagonistic;

n And finally, the healing that is still needed, for those who lost loved ones, for the veterans who suffered and were forever changed, and for the nation to close the wounds that this war left on the American psyche.

What better place could there be for a Visitors Center, than here at this sacred wall? Building it here will stimulate millions of Americans to learn more about the Vietnam War and the lessons it teaches us. This is in the best tradition of war memorials, which are built so that future generations will always remember, will never forget, the sacrifices that were made.

Almost forty years ago, when I was a Specialist Four hoping to survive in Vietnam, I found a paperback book in a PX by the great French journalist, Bernard Fall. That book educated me about the roots of the conflict. After I read it, I finally understood something about how I – and the other 550,000 Americans on the ground then – had ended up in what many thought was a quagmire. I was grateful for that book, because it brought me understanding. If, by building a Visitors Center in this sacred space we can bring some similar measure of understanding to the millions of young people who visit this hallowed ground each year, our capital and our nation will be the better for it.

Thank you very much for the privilege of testifying today.

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